

# HEROIN: THE RED ROUTE

When a Dutch drug pusher was fished out of the Amstel River, the trail of his killer revealed the latest heroin-smuggling route : overland through Russia to Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. COLIN SMITH reports.

IN THE lucifugous bars of Amsterdam's red light district, it was impossible to find anyone who had a bad word to say about Rob Koning. An emaciated female heroin addict, 20 going on 50 and having trouble selling her body to an increasingly AIDS-conscious clientele, said that just because he was a drugs dealer didn't mean he wasn't a gentleman.

The owner of one marijuana-scented establishment, a man with large friends and an interesting scar on his bald pate, was passing around a cheroot-sized joint to anyone who wanted a drag. 'Rob Koning was a good man,' he sighed. 'Everybody loved him.'

Not quite everybody. On 15 May Koning was drinking at a quiet bar-cum-restaurant called The Magere Brug on the right bank of the Amstel River, near the Carre Theatre. This is a respectable part of town, recommended in at least one tourist guide for its 'pleasant evening walks.' The bar is named after the Magere Bridge, a hand-operated draw-bridge which begins less than 100 yards away across the street.

About midnight Koning left the bar, where he was a popular customer and considered a particular friend of the proprietor. Outside, a lone gunman shot him once in the back and then pursued the wounded Koning, a non-swimmer, as he ran on to the bridge and hurled himself off. As Koning thrashed about in the water, the gunman shot him again before running away. He was pulled out of the river alive but died shortly afterwards in hospital.

Koning, who was 35, was a well-known drugs dealer. According to the Dutch police, his speciality was cannabis, though he probably also sold heroin from time to time. Given his occupation, the manner of his death would not be all that remarkable. But in the course of turning over the usual suspects in a murder investigation linked with other gangland killings, Amsterdam detectives got wind of the biggest and most unusual plot ever discovered to smuggle heroin into Western Europe.

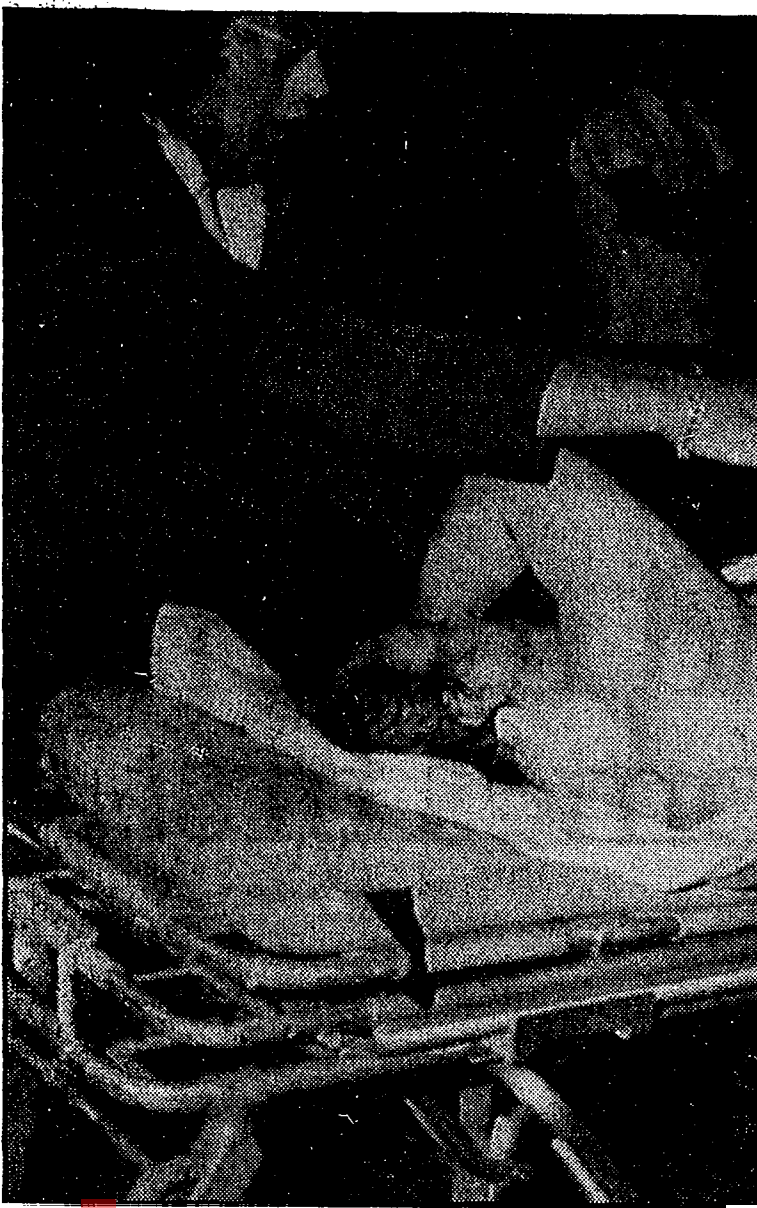
On 2 June, the Soviet freighter Kapitán Tonson arrived in Rotterdam laden with cargo from the Baltic port of Riga. Among this freight were two containers packed with 30 tonnes of raisins from Afghanistan. Ever since the Soviet occupation of that country six years ago, the fighting has made it almost impossible to export goods in a westerly direction, particularly overland through the Khyber Pass, which is territory held by the Mujahideen.

The Kapitán Tonson departed Rotterdam the next day. On the quayside she left two containers from Afghanistan which were then searched by a police team led by Inspector Hank Groenendyk of the port's Narcotics Squad. Thereaisins were in cardboard boxes. It took Groenendyk's team half-an-hour to find the heroin which was packed into linen and plastic bags and had been placed in the bottom of some of the boxes before being loosely covered with the dried fruit.

Altogether they found 485 lb. of the drug. It is more heroin than Holland uses in a year. In London the haul would have a street value of about £13 million. However, the most unusual feature about this seizure was not its size — still beaten by a haul picked up by the Bombay police — but the route.

In 1980, the Pathan Mujahideen, whose tribal homelands straddle the Afghan-Pakistan frontier, began to get involved with production of heroin. This was partly because the West did not at first put its money where its mouth was as far as supplying ordnance was concerned. The guerrillas were left to the mercy of the arms merchants.

A small amount of the heroin made in the mobile bath tub laboratories, around the Khyber, goes south through India and then in an eastern



End of the line : The dying Rob Koning is wheeled away by Rotterdam police. His link with the Russian ship smuggling heroin (inset) proved fatal.

direction so that it ends up on America's West Coast. Most of it comes the other way. It is smuggled into Europe either by sea from Karachi or Bombay or by couriers travelling by air, usually from Islamabad.

The idea of it going directly east through Soviet-occupied territory and then through Russia itself is quite revolutionary. For a start, it either means that heroin is being produced behind the Communist lines or that there is some collusion between the people manufacturing the drug around the Khyber and somebody in government-controlled territory who could insert it into a shipment of raisins.

Mr Hans Van Weezel, a right-wing Dutch MP, thinks that it is all a KGB plot to make up for the Soviet Union's grave shortages of hard currency. Others have taken up his cry, but both senior Dutch policemen and the veterans of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), who have agents at most US embassies, say that there is no proof of official Soviet involvement.

## Middle man

Commissioner Gerrit de Gooyer, who co-ordinates criminal intelligence on drugs at the Centrale Recherche Informatiedienst at The Hague, thinks that a deal of this magnitude could only have been initiated by somebody coming from Afghanistan or Pakistan. 'Of course, it would have been a middle man. People behind these deals always stay clean. Somebody would have had to come first — nobody just sends that amount of drugs and hopes to sell it without making careful arrangements.'

Both Commissioner de Gooyer and the Amsterdam and Rotterdam police are refusing to divulge details of the exact connection between the Riga shipment and the murder of Rob Koning, the Amsterdam dealer. Three Rotterdam men arrested in connection with the haul were released when a court ruled there was insufficient evidence.

Some experts feel that the latest US Presidential campaign against drug abuse, which has seen American troops giving well-publicised support to Bolivian police operations of uncertain efficiency, has come at a time when the American market is so saturated with cocaine, heroin and marijuana that the drug dealers are turning increasingly towards Europe.

There are estimated to be half a million hard-core heroin addicts in the United States. But heroin addicts in Western Europe are now almost as numerous, according to DEA figures, and

nobody really has any idea how many Europeans are regular users of cocaine. At one time DEA officials could easily map the flow of narcotics from sources such as South-East Asia's Golden Triangle to the markets in the US. Now all that has changed. 'A chart would look like a plate of spaghetti,' one American expert was quoted as saying in a recent article in the *New York Times*.

There are two main sources for the opium from which heroin and morphine is derived — the Golden Triangle and its rival the Golden Crescent, which stretches from Iran through the craggy fief held by the Mujahideen guerrillas to the Kurdish-speaking areas of Turkey's Eastern Anatolia. Cocaine comes from South America, particularly from Bolivia and Colombia, and given their colonial links with that continent, it is easy to understand why the Iberian peninsula has become the European entrepot for the drug.

Somewhere along the line opium has to go through quite a complicated laboratory process to be turned into heroin. This used to be done in Sicily and Marseilles. But at the moment the Mafia is going through its darkest hour since Mussolini, with a mass trial taking place in Palermo, the Sicilian capital. And the famed Marseilles connection is mostly dead or behind bars, although the DEA believes that some of the old firm have opened up shop again in Switzerland.

Cocaine also has to go through a chemical process, though nowhere near as complicated as the opium-heroin route, to turn it into the sniffers' cocaine hydrochloride. This is usually done in South America, although sometimes it is further refined in the United States or Europe. Crack, the cheap smokeable mixture of cocaine, baking powder (sodium bicarbonate) and water, which is sold in crystalline form and looks like slivers of soap, is usually made in the United States.

To date there are no confirmed reports of crack — also known as 'rock' in California — reaching Europe.

Scotland Yard's National Drugs Intelligence Unit have known for some time that Spain and Portugal are used as staging posts to bring cocaine into the United Kingdom. Some of the Latin American drug barons have established permanent homes there.

On 21 July the Colombian ship La Guajira, with 21,000 tonnes of soya bean oil on board, rounded Cape Finisterre and entered

the Spanish port of Corunna. One of the harbour staff recalled that for some days callers had been anxiously inquiring about La Guajira's arrival.

The ship usually sails between Buenaventura, its home port, and through the Panama Canal, taking soya bean oil one way and American wheat the other. But on this last voyage, its owner had changed its destination by radio and the vessel had turned north into the South Atlantic and followed the old galleon route to Spain. There was nothing particularly strange about this. Merchant ships are often required to tack in the direction of the most favourable commodity prices.

Among the people asking after La Guajira at the harbour office were the police. The Brigada Central d'Estupefacientes (BCE), the Spanish drugs squad which co-ordinates the efforts of all regional forces, had received information that among the crew of the freighter were smugglers who had hidden a quantity of cocaine aboard. The tip-off almost certainly came from the US DEA who have an agent operating out of their embassy in Madrid, as well as their diplomatic missions in most Latin American countries.

At first it was a fairly ordinary bust. The police picked up the ship's cook and some other members of the crew trying to sell cocaine in a disreputable Spanish man and a Colombian woman. They went back to the ship and began to search it, concentrating on the galley and the crew's quarters. Hidden in pots and pans and beneath bunk beds they found 11½ lb. of cocaine tied into neat parcels. At this point, they had a total of 17 lb. which would be worth about £2 million.

The Corunna police were feeling rather pleased with themselves, but the Brigada Central d'Estupefacientes were far from satisfied. According to their information there was much more than this on board. The BCE sent some of its experts from Madrid and they began to search very thoroughly indeed. 'We spent an entire weekend on that boat,' Major Rodriguez Nicolas, the second-in-command of the squad, told me.

Little by little the BCE began to find more of La Guajira's secret cargo. Almost all of it was hidden in the crew's quarters. One package was discovered behind the panel beneath a step in a staircase. The total came to just over 176 lb. At current London prices this is about £20 million worth of cocaine. It is far and above the biggest single cocaine haul ever made by any police force or customs service anywhere in Europe.

The cautious men who make real fortunes out of drugs are

rarely brought to justice. It is the couriers, the people paid for the risk of passing through a customs checkpoint and making contact with the next link in the chain, who are sometimes netted. Even then few countries can honestly claim a high rate of detection.

For those couriers known as mules or camels, who smuggle drugs by swallowing them in condoms or balloons and letting nature take its course, the consequences can still be fatal even when they don't risk the death penalty. Several have died painfully from liver and kidney failure after the container broke open in their stomach. In June a carpet importer from Teheran, Mr Masoud Mirshani, died at Heathrow airport when 18 out of 45 small balloons containing opium ruptured.

One smuggler told his interrogators that his employers had set up a proper training school where he spent several days practising the technique, starting with whole olives and progressing to onions. In Britain suspected mules are often X-rayed and if their stomach contents seem suspicious are kept in a special room with non-flush sanitary facilities until they have a bowel movement.

The tendency to X-ray has increased since the extraordinary case of Mr Theodoros van Empel, a 35-year-old Dutchman arrested at Heathrow in October 1984 after traces of marijuana were found on his clothing. Despite pleas from his counsel, who was seeking a writ of habeas corpus and claimed that his client was merely constipated, he was held for 19 days until he provided proof of his innocence.

Normally smuggling syndicates would never dream of using the sort of person who looks as if he or she might enjoy the odd puff of cannabis. Gurkha soldiers, airline hostesses, beauty queens, a former Pakistani squash champion, and a Japanese gentleman whose luck only ran out when he abandoned his boy scout outfit to pose as a diplomat, have all succumbed to the temptation — usually about £2,000 a trip — to act as couriers.

In May, two London men, both in their late sixties, were sent to prison for three years for attempting to bring in herbal cannabis from South Africa. In June Mr Thomas Western, a frail looking 75-year-old who uses a walking stick, was jailed for nine years after he was caught driving cocaine off the Dover ferry. The drug was packed in plastic lunch boxes and shampoo bottles and hidden in the door panels of his hire car.

Western, who had previous convictions for drug smuggling, was working as a courier for a

gang who had stashed cocaine in Paris in preparation for selling it on the British market. It is a favourite ploy to avoid whenever possible bringing drugs directly to their intended market place. A pensioner returning from a day trip to France should have got through easily. Western was unlucky enough to have an alert customs officer at first accidentally knock his car door panel and then do it again when he noticed that it did not sound quite hollow enough.

## Sniff out

Smuggling is rather like aerial warfare in that both sides are constantly trying to better the other's technology. Apart from a host of infernal machines designed to sniff out the kinds of drugs that dogs cannot detect, Britain's Customs and Excise

Department now have a computer called CEDRIC which contains 750,000 records, although these include VAT frauds.

But a lot of their success comes from the intuitive kind of nose more in keeping with detective fiction. Nor is it always as easy as the man who told them that he had come to Britain to decide which school would be suitable for his sons (Eton, Harrow or Roedean). Who would believe, for instance, that clothing was impregnated with a solution of cocaine and later dunked in boiling water to extract the drug in crystal form? Or crocodile skins, which traditionally come to this country covered in a white talcum powder to help preserve them, being covered for nobody knows how many shipments in a

powder that was certainly not talc? Or an air cargo of live parrots in which a couple of birds appeared to have died in transit? In fact they were killed, gutted, stuffed with cocaine and loaded on with the live birds.

Men like Commissioner de Gooyer and his Spanish counterpart Major Nicolas are under few illusions about who is winning the drugs war. 'I am never really surprised when we discover a new route,' said the Dutchman. Major Nicolas is of the opinion that they catch no more than 20 per cent of the people who smuggle drugs into Spain. And in Amsterdam the sickly young whores who were Koning's victims will probably consider him a bit of a gent to the day they die — which will be sooner rather than later.



The red route : Afghan heroin passed across the border into Russia, then to Riga, where it was shipped to Rotterdam